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Saudi Policies in the Syria Crisis

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Abstract

This chapter examines the motives driving Saudi policies against Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syria crisis. Amid the transformation of the Syrian uprisings into a civil war in the post-2011 period, the Saudi Kingdom's policies toward the Syria crisis have not been static. Whereas the Kingdom initially adopted a policy of accommodation that ensures the survival of Bashar al-Assad through reforms, it later adopted policies with the intent of overthrowing the Syrian regime. Since August 2011, the Saudi Kingdom has been determined to depose al-Assad while actively supporting several opposition groups in Syria through diplomatic, military, and financial means. Often portrayed as either driven by sectarian factors or traditional strategic concerns, the dynamics of the Saudi involvement in Syria can be instead explained as part of a larger bid for regional leadership, fusing ideational and material elements.

Introduction

Ever since the formation of the modern states of Syria and Saudi Arabia, the relationship between the two countries has constituted a ‘paradox’ in Middle East international relations. On the one hand, the two have often stood on opposing sides; represented diametrically opposing ideologies; clashed through proxies across the region; and taken divergent alliance decisions during major regional wars. On the other hand, the relationship between the al-Assad regime and the Al Saud evolved over time into an enduring entente, at times reaching the status of an uneasy alliance that shaped inter-Arab politics over decades. For example, in the last two decades, and particularly since the 2003 Iraq War, Syria has been a constituent part of the so-called ‘resistance axis’, including Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas.¹ The Saudi Kingdom, meanwhile, has been in the opposing camp, alongside Egypt and Jordan.² Nevertheless, the Saudi Kingdom maintained outwardly amicable relations with the al-Assad regime. The Al Saud had long calculated that isolating the al-Assad regime or trying to overthrow it would be counterproductive, likely leading to its further radicalisation and the consolidation of its alliance with Iran. Although former President Hafiz al-Assad maintained relatively amicable relations with the Saudi Kingdom, especially after al-Assad’s decision to join the US coalition during the Gulf War (1990-91), the relationship under Bashar al-Assad has been less cordial. Initially, when Bashar succeeded his father in 2000, the Saudi Kingdom supported the young ruler and saw an opportunity to pull Syria away from Iran. With the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri in Lebanon in 2005, the relationship between al-Assad and King Abdullah soured, reaching a nadir with al-Assad calling King Abdullah and other Arab leaders ‘half-men’ for not supporting Lebanon during the 2006 Lebanon War.³ Still, despite the strains in their relationship following the 2006 Lebanon war and the 2009 Gaza war, prior to 2011 the Kingdom expressed willingness for a détente with Bashar al-Assad.⁴

When the Syrian uprisings ignited in March 2011, the Saudis were unsure of the course to adopt and were rather cautious in their approach toward the crisis. Some scholars have attributed the Kingdom’s initial cautious reaction to domestic factors. In the context of the Arab Uprisings, the primary goal of the Kingdom was to prevent the protests from reaching the Gulf.⁵ Consequently, the Saudis played the role of a counterrevolutionary force opposing any change to their long-lasting allies in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain.⁶ These counterrevolutionary efforts intensified further with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in North Africa. Additionally, the Saudis perceived al-Assad to be a resilient leader who survived isolation, rebellion, and US policies in Iraq; he earned further good will from the Kingdom by refraining from condemning the Saudi intervention in Bahrain in March 2011. As a result, during the early stages of the Syrian uprisings, Saudi Arabia remained favourable to al-Assad’s regime and encouraged al-Assad adopt reform and desist repressing protests. The initial approach was to support al-Assad in exchange for limited concessions, mainly distancing Syria from Iran. King Abdullah sent his son Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al Saud, the then deputy minister of foreign

affairs, to meet with Bashar al-Assad three times in an attempt to offset Iranian influence over Syria. On all three occasions, however, al-Assad refused to meet with Abdulaziz, rendering the Saudi initiative futile.⁷

Partly as a result of these frustrated policies, by late summer 2011 the Saudi approach toward the Syria crisis shifted from attempting to bring Syria under Saudi influence to seeking the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime. As it became clear that al-Assad was unable to deal with the crisis despite the heavy-handed tactics, the Saudi Kingdom perceived the geostrategic opportunity to disrupt the Syria-Iran axis. In August 2011, King Abdullah issued a warning indicating this radical shift in the Saudi approach towards the Syrian regime:

What is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia (...) Syria should think wisely before it's too late and issue and enact reforms that are not merely promises but actual reforms. Either it chooses wisdom on its own, or it will be pulled down into the depths of turmoil and loss.⁸

Following this warning, the Saudi Kingdom withdrew its ambassador to Damascus. Against the history of containment and implicit entente between the Saudi Kingdom and the Syrian regime, the decision to overthrow al-Assad constituted an important development in Saudi policies in the region. Conveying the impression of intervening in the conflict for humanitarian purposes, King Abdullah urged al-Assad 'to stop the killing machine'.⁹ In addition, the Saudi Kingdom adopted several strategies and tactics over time to overthrow al-Assad regime, including¹⁰ supporting the Syrian National Council (SNC); playing a dominant role in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC); arming the Free Syrian Army (FSA); supporting the Islamic Front; pledging to send troops to Syria; and hosting various Syrian armed groups in 2015.¹¹ Despite the evolution of the conflict and the rise of extremist groups — particularly Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (IS) — the Saudis remained determined to depose al-Assad. Amid international talks intended to unite efforts in fighting the rise of extremism, Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Jubeir insisted that 'Bashar al-Assad must go or face military option'.¹² Importantly, despite changes in Saudi leadership in 2015, Saudi foreign policy towards the Syria crisis has remained largely unchanged.

This chapter examines the motives driving Saudi policies against al-Assad's regime while exploring the key changes in these policies over the period from 2011 to 2017. The existing literature presents various explanations of the Saudi behaviour in the Syria crisis. The first strand of explanations present a primordial reading of the conflict. Scholars of this approach characterize the war as fundamentally a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites on both domestic and regional levels, where regional actors from both sects have contributed to fuelling this perception.¹³ These scholars have relied on primordial approaches to identity formation in analysing the Sunni-Shiite divide as the primary driver of the conflict. The second strand in the literature belong to the realist view in

International Relations. with the involvement of several international and regional actors, namely Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, the Syria crisis is often characterised as a proxy war. Realist scholars focus on geopolitical factors, especially the troubled relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Accordingly, the Syrian civil war is viewed as a proxy war where Saudi Arabia and Iran are vying for regional influence.

This chapter seeks to challenge both primordial and realist explanations of Saudi behaviour while offering a comprehensive approach towards understanding what appears to be a growing Saudi assertiveness against Bashar al-Assad's regime amidst the increasing intensity of threats from extremist groups. The chapter argues that the dynamics of the Saudi involvement in Syria can be understood as part of a larger regional contest over leadership, which fuses ideational and material elements. Drawing on the concept of recognition in international relations, I argue that the Saudis have been struggling to acquire recognition for their identity narrative claiming the leadership of Sunni Islam in the region. This quest for recognition is reinforced and enabled by growing Saudi military and economic capabilities. As the Saudis have, so far, failed to acquire this aspired recognition from regional and international actors, their reaction has been aggressive and violent in an attempt to achieve the desired acknowledgment of their power and rank by force if necessary.

The chapter is divided into three sections. First, while I examine alternative explanations of Saudi involvement in the Syrian conflict, I present the conceptual framework that I use in support of my argument, outlining the concept of recognition and how it operates in state behaviour at the international level. Second, I present an analysis of Saudi involvement in the Syrian conflict as part of its larger regional ambitions in the Middle East. Third, I trace the key changes in Saudi policies towards war-torn Syria over time, from overt diplomatic actions to military assistance to anti-Assad groups. I also explore the impact these policies have had on the Syria crisis and shaped the conflict's evolution in the process.

Theorising Saudi Policy in Syria

Understanding the dynamics of Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian conflict requires an examination of the existing explanations. While few analysts dispute the centrality of Saudi Arabia's role in the Syria crisis, there is, however, scholarly disagreement on the factors shaping its behaviour towards al-Assad. Simply put, there are two divergent explanations. The most common of these is sectarian, treating the Sunni–Shiite divide as a primary factor driving Saudi animosity against al-Assad and his allies — namely Iran and Hezbollah. The second explanation adopts a realist perspective, according to which the Syrian conflict is a proxy war, in which Saudi-Iranian rivalry play a determining role, with sectarian narratives as mere instruments of a power struggle.

Although observers continue to stress that multiple factors shape Saudi policies in Syria, the Sunni–Shiite divide has come to dominate media analyses¹⁴ and policy reports.¹⁵ These analyses belong to a primordial approach that emphasises culture and identity as the determinants of conflict and cooperation between actors. Primordialists view the Sunni–Shiite divide as the core conflict dominating the region, originating in the seventh century and still pertaining to current political dynamics.¹⁶ It is true that sectarianism is an undeniable element in Saudi policies generally speaking.¹⁷ In the 1980s, the most important period of sectarian bitterness growing out of the challenge of the Iranian Islamic Revolution (1979) to the Sunni Arab monarchies, the Kingdom actively used the Sunni–Shiite divide to counter the revolutionary message of Ayatollah Khomeini.¹⁸ Whereas there was no official sectarian discourse, the Kingdom tacitly endorsed sectarian narratives at the time.¹⁹ As Jones claims, ‘managing and strategically deploying anti-Shiism is [...] an important part of [King Abdullah’s] government political calculus’.²⁰

Yet, an exclusive focus on sectarianism as a motive seriously distorts the analysis of Saudi policies in Syria, and elsewhere. Although the Kingdom has manipulated sectarian discourses to legitimise its regional policies — especially in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq — the motives driving these policies are far from sectarian. Riyadh has crossed the sectarian fault line in seeking regional allies and proxies across the region, Syria included. Despite opposing some groups with a Shiite background — such as the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon — the Saudis have not limited their alliances to fellow Sunnis, nor have they supported every Sunni group in the Middle East. In Iraq, Riyadh backed secular parties during the elections of 2005 and 2010, such as the Iraqiya party led by Iyad Allawi. From a sectarian perspective, the Muslim Brotherhood was the natural ally of Saudi Arabia in Syria and Egypt. Nevertheless, the Kingdom demonised the Brotherhood in Egypt, Tunisia, and across the Gulf.²¹ Similarly, sectarianism was hardly the basis upon which the Saudis have sought regional allies or local proxies in Syria.²² Initially, the Saudis supported the least sectarian groups involved in the conflict — such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Following the failure of the FSA in making military progress, the Saudis moved to supporting the Islamic Front as well as other Salafi groups (For an overview of the different Syrian rebel groups, cf. BBC News).²³

The second common explanation of Saudi policies adopts a realist approach. Realists often argue that states are seeking security and survival and that their decision in resorting to armed violence is based on a rational cost-benefit analysis.²⁴ Realist scholars, therefore, argue that grasping the nature of the Iranian-Saudi struggle is central to understanding Saudi policies in Syria. The conflict in Syria is explained as an extension of the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.²⁵ The Saudi Kingdom has made it clear that it perceives the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah axis as a source of threat and instability in the region. From a realist perspective, this threat perception is driven by geopolitical interests, where identities are only instruments masking geopolitical rivalry over influence in the Gulf, Lebanon, and

Iraq.²⁶ From this point of view, Riyadh considers a regime change in Syria to be a crucial opportunity to weaken Iran's influence in the region and abolish the Syria-Iran axis. As a Saudi official stated, 'Syria is Iran's entry into the Arab world [...] take down al-Assad and you inflict a strategic blow on Iran'.²⁷

Although this realist view of the conflict is understandably convenient, it is analytically problematic. A pure geostrategic explanation claims that actors not only use material means to achieve their goals but that they also have fixed preferences, namely the maximisation of power and security. Their interests are determined by and would shift with changes in the relative power distribution. Strategic explanations cannot account for the shift in Saudi intentions towards al-Assad. Until August 2011, the Saudi Kingdom has pursued a regional policy favouring stability, including the survival of the al-Assad regime. In this context, strategic explanations alone cannot explain why the Saudis initially supported the al-Assad regime after the 2011 uprising and then switched to a policy dedicated to overthrowing him (since August 2011). While the 2011 Arab uprisings have reinforced the prevailing view that Iran is finding opportunities in Arab instability to fulfil its ambitions of regional hegemony, the regional configuration provides serious constraints on Iran's ability to project its power. According to at least some scholars, Iran's military capabilities are limited and often exaggerated.²⁸ Iran's conventional military capabilities are far less than those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.²⁹ In 2014, it was estimated that the GCC states spent US\$ 114 billion on defence compared to Iran's 16 billion. Moreover, the GCC states have a significant qualitative advantage, in that US support and technology transfer to the GCC is far more superior.³⁰ In short, the Syrian-Iranian axis has persisted over decades, and the balance of military capabilities did not change during the post-2011 order, making a realist explanation of Saudi policy shifts problematic.

Against this backdrop, this chapter claims that neither pure strategic interests nor solely sectarian elements explain Saudi policies in Syria. Instead, the chapter offers a reading of the Kingdom's involvement in Syria as a bid for regional leadership fusing material and social elements of power contestation in the Middle East. The sudden possibility of al-Assad's fall emerged as an opportunity for the Kingdom to destroy the Syria-Iran axis and assert its regional leadership in the region. The remainder of this section examines the concept of 'recognition' as a theoretical lens that can provide a comprehensive explanation of Saudi policies in the Syria crisis. I present the 'recognition' concept by integrating a 'thin constructivist' perspective³¹ into the strategic dimension of security interests. I argue here that the quest for recognition of regional status and the search for material power and security usually go hand in hand and reinforce each other. On the one hand, aspiration for symbolic superiority invites and encourages the quest for material power. On the other hand, recognition can serve as an instrument to advance material interests. In empirical terms, the Saudi Kingdom pursued aggressive policies in Syria with an eye toward establishing itself as a regional leader. At the same time,

the Kingdom's quest for such leadership is inextricably related to material capabilities and the pursuit of physical security.

Studies in philosophy,³² social psychology,³³ sociology,³⁴ and political science³⁵ have demonstrated the importance of nonmaterial needs in social relations. Identity has an intersubjective nature, i.e., actors operating in a social system need to present an identity narrative that describes who they are and where they stand in relation to others; they also need to have this narrative accepted by others around them. In this sense, actors are in constant negotiation with the surrounding social structure. In the realm of international relations, this theoretical viewpoint suggests that states have a need to be recognised. Furthermore, as states are in a relentless struggle to form their identity and to force others to affirm their subjective narratives, recognition is related to the quest for material power. The relationship between symbolic and physical dimensions of power is twofold. The first aspect exhibits an instrumental, utilitarian logic, according to which recognition advances material interests.³⁶ States seek recognition in order to demonstrate their power and achieve dominance. In other words, the demonstration of superiority might itself be a source of material power.³⁷ The second logic is psychological, according to which recognition is an intrinsic need related to human nature — including other symbolic dimensions such as honour, prestige, glory, or reputation.³⁸ Therefore, material interests can be means to achieve this human motive intrinsic to the elites responsible for states' foreign policy.³⁹

It should be noted that any apparent dichotomy between instrumental and psychological logics is artificial. Symbolic and material dimensions of power go hand in hand. States have needs for material power as well as recognition. Material and symbolic dimensions of power can interact in various ways. States' aspirations for symbolic superiority and recognition encourage the quest for material power. It is easier to force others to recognise one's identity narrative when one possesses the means. In the meantime, the demonstration of power may be a source of material power. Any form of material power requires an intersubjective agreement on its reality.⁴⁰ Highlighting these symbolic and material dimensions of recognition, scholars argue that the lack of 'recognition' can lead to aggressive reactions. In some cases, states stand firmly in defense of their self-description and are ready to fight to prove that it is correct.⁴¹ As recognition is inextricably related to material power, actors can perceive a lack of recognition as a threat to their material ambitions. The urge to redress this insufficient status recognition can result in violence.⁴²

This above theoretical framework will provide an explanation unravelling the drivers of Saudi policies in Syria. In the next section, I examine the growing material capabilities of the Kingdom and how it reinforced Saudi claim of leadership. In the meantime, the constant struggle of the Saudi regime to be recognised as a leading actor has been a failure, igniting violent and aggressive reactions, especially in Syria.

Drivers of Saudi Policies in Syria

By employing the concept of ‘recognition’, this study posits that the Saudis, for quite some time, have felt that their economic wealth and religious status entitle them to a top-rank status in the regional system. This perception of power has emerged alongside a hubristic identity narrative claiming Saudi religious and normative superiority in the Arab world, i.e., the leadership of Sunni Islam. Nevertheless, this narrative of superiority has not been widely recognised and has, in fact, been challenged by other Sunni actors. In response, the Saudis have felt the urge to redress the insufficient status recognition through an aggressive countermeasure in Syria, and recently in Yemen.

The oil-rich Kingdom wields far greater influence and power today than it did half a century ago. Based on its significant fiscal resources and growing military capabilities, the Kingdom has adopted a self-depiction of a regional power shaping outcomes in the Middle East. Saudi material power has two dimensions: fiscal and military. Donating money for political purposes to other regimes and groups throughout the Middle East has been a tradition referred to as Saudi *Riyalpolitik*. In addition, the Kingdom has significantly increased its military capabilities. Military spending has more than doubled in the last decade, reaching US\$ 67 billion per year.⁴³ As recent estimates from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) show, the Saudi Kingdom is now fourth in line after the United States, China, and Russia in military spending. De facto, the Kingdom is the biggest buyer of foreign weapons and security systems on the globe.⁴⁴ Although there are considerable doubts regarding the real efficiency of Saudi military forces, the Kingdom has been able to demonstrate its capabilities in Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain.

Saudi decisions since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings provide strong evidence that the Kingdom wants to be perceived as a regional actor shaping the course of events according to own preferences and interests, as the post-2011 order has provided the Kingdom with the opportunity to expand its power and influence across the region. In the present situation, it has been clear that no other Arab country is capable of achieving the status of dominant or sole regional leadership, particularly as Egypt became focused on its domestic problems and Syria descended into civil war. From this point of view, it might be argued that Saudi Arabia has sought to fill this wide open void in Arab power. Nevertheless, Saudi strategy of supporting the Syrian rebels is in fact linked to its seemingly waning regional influence in favour of non-Arab actors, namely Iran and Turkey. On the one hand, Riyadh has constantly perceived Iran’s influence in the region to be threatening, especially through its influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories.⁴⁵ On the other hand, Turkey has competed with the Saudis on many regional issues, especially the thorny question of the Muslim Brotherhood’s position in Egypt. In this context, the Syrian conflict presented an opportunity for the Saudis to assert their material power in the Middle East and convey the image of a regional power capable of shaping outcomes in its surrounding. Overthrowing al-Assad and replacing it with a friendly regime to the Saudis meant further

isolating Iran and depriving it of its main ally. Moreover, as Syria is located at the heart of the Arab world, the establishment of an allied regime would enable the Saudis to exert more influence in Iraq and Lebanon.⁴⁶

To promote its regional status further, the Saudi Kingdom has relied on its religious status as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques to promote its self-ascribed status as the symbolic leader of the Sunni and Muslim worlds. This type of identity has in fact granted historically the Kingdom a symbolic status in the region. The tremendous amount of financial resources and the growth in the Kingdom's military capabilities over the past decades has contributed to the Saudi status consciousness, resulting in the elites' feelings that the state is treated far below their 'appropriate' status, as regional and international actors have not recognized the acclaimed Saudi status of de facto regional leadership. I argue that this lack of recognition is at the origin of what scholars have observed as a 'shift from traditionally cautious and conciliatory [Saudi] foreign and regional policy towards a sharper affirmation of [Saudi] interests'.⁴⁷ In the context of the Syrian crisis, the Saudis saw deposing al-Assad as an opportunity to redress this situation, through providing a definitive demonstration of their influence and capabilities in the Middle East.

While the Saudis have attempted to assert themselves as regional leaders, both regional and international actors have challenged this Saudi narrative of superiority. For example, in the Gulf, the Saudis sent troops to support its Bahraini ally King Hamad Al Khalifa against internal protests, which signalled Saudi determination to take the lead in protecting the Gulf from the effects of the Arab uprisings.⁴⁸ Moreover, Saudi Arabia proposed that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) be expanded to include Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt, an idea that was not welcomed by all GCC members.⁴⁹ On many occasions, the Saudis proposed the institutionalisation of an expanded, tighter, and greater union of the GCC under their command. King Abdullah's proposals for greater political integration in the Gulf collapsed with Oman's opposition and Kuwait's reluctance. In December 2013, Oman opposed Saudi plans for a unified command structure for the armed forces of the six states.⁵⁰ Kuwait refused to sign a GCC internal security pact, as it will compromise its political liberalism and its exceptional constitutional principles within the Gulf.⁵¹ The emergence of Qatari-Emirati animosity over Libya and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt made Saudi ambitions further unattainable.⁵² The most important challenge to the Saudi attempt of acquiring the recognition of Saudi regional status in the Gulf is Qatar's foreign policy that explicitly opposed Saudi policies in Egypt and Syria.

The Saudi claim of regional leadership received another hit as the Kingdom failed to build a coalition against Iran.⁵³ The Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon has long rankled the Saudis, as it empirically counteracted the Kingdom's claim to regional hegemony. The Kingdom has, in recent years, attempted to counter the vexing Iranian presence by relying on its Islamic identity, and placing itself at the centre of a regional coalition (or in sectarian terms a 'Sunni' coalition) aimed against Shiite

Iran. Yet, despite these efforts, every GCC state except Saudi Arabia and Bahrain approved the interim nuclear agreement between the US and Iran in November 2013 and received Iran's foreign minister.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Oman secretly hosted the initial preliminary deals between Iran and the United States, which led the nuclear talks. Turkey, which seemed a natural member of a 'Sunni' coalition against Iran, challenged the Saudi Kingdom's policies towards the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. These apparent rejections of its bid for leadership moved the Saudis to feel that regional actors did not 'appropriately' recognise their self-ascribed status. As Khalid al-Dakhil, a prominent Saudi sociologist and commentator stated: 'During King Abdullah, we did not have a foreign policy, and just watched events unfold in front of our eyes'.⁵⁵ This need for recognition has even intensified under the leadership of King Salman. Some observers speculate that the new leadership blames the late King Abdullah's cautious foreign policy for the loss of the Kingdom's prestige and its status misrecognition.

Furthermore, the Arab uprisings challenged not only the Kingdom's regional status (whether self-perceived or real) as the leader of Sunni Islam but also the credibility of its identity narrative. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region as an alternative to the collapsing regimes constituted an important challenge to the Kingdom's narrative as the leader of Sunni Islam.⁵⁶ In response, the Kingdom attempted to build a regional coalition criminalising the group and pressuring other regional actors in joining its own proclamation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, some states with strong connections with the Brotherhood — such as Jordan and Kuwait — refused to comply with these Saudi demands.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, by scoring important victories in Iraq and Syria, the 'Islamic State' (IS) put the Saudi claim of Sunni leadership under further pressure. The Kingdom's quest to place itself at the centre of a regional coalition to counter ISIS did not resonate in the region. In December 2015, the Saudis announced a counterterrorism coalition including 34 Muslim countries. Yet, the main countries involved in the conflict — namely Iran, Syria, and Iraq — did not join the coalition, which constituted a blow to the Kingdom's quest for regional leadership.⁵⁸

Moving to another level of analysis, internationally, the Kingdom has felt that its regional interests and ambitions have been met with 'disrespect', especially from the United States. Since its foundation, the Kingdom has relied on external powers, first the British, and then the United States, to ensure its security. Such dependence was exemplified in 1990 when the Kingdom called the United States to protect them from Saddam Hussein who invaded and annexed Kuwait. Following the 2011 uprisings, the Saudis became convinced that the divergence between Riyadh and Washington has hindered the Kingdom's regional interests. The Saudis perceived Obama's policies in the region not only as abandoning the US historical responsibilities towards preserving the Kingdom's security but also as a clear disrespect to the Kingdom's interests.⁵⁹ With the 2011 Arab uprisings, the US reluctance to support long-lived autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen has caused a rift in US-Saudi relations. The Kingdom felt the need to shape an independent foreign policy in the region. Such drive became

further confirmed following the US reluctance to intervene in Syria and its attempt to amend its policies toward Iran, the Saudi Kingdom discarded its traditional defence doctrine and attempted to rely on its own resources for security. Furthermore, the nuclear deals with Iran showed that US interests overlapped with Iranian ones in fighting Sunni extremism in Iraq and Syria. In this context, insisting on deposing al-Assad constitutes a reaction from the Saudis to redress their claim of recognition as a regional power able to control outcomes in the region. The following section examines the various tools deployed by the Saudi Kingdom in Syria and how they evolved over the course of the crisis. Furthermore, the section discusses the implications of Saudi policies on the Syria crisis.

Instruments of Saudi Policies and Their Implications

In its endeavour to depose al-Assad, the Saudi Kingdom deployed various policies: diplomatic, financial, and ideational. The initial tool involved deploying diplomatic and economic pressure on al-Assad. After withdrawing its ambassador from Damascus in August 2011, the Saudi Kingdom played an active role in the Arab League to pressure al-Assad to resign.⁶⁰ Although the Syrian regime initially showed a willingness to conform to the League's demands, the domestic violence continued to escalate. Following the failure to implement this plan, the Saudi Kingdom engaged actively with the Arab League to propose the 'Arab Peace Plan Initiative' in November 2011, a plan centered on the hand-over of power from al-Assad to his deputy and a unity government.⁶¹ Simultaneously, the League imposed economic sanctions on Syria. Given the close economic ties between Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, and Syria, these sanctions were symbolic rather than playing an effective role in pressuring al-Assad.⁶²

Deeming diplomacy at the regional level inefficient, the Saudis called upon the international community for greater international pressure against al-Assad while encouraging the US to take an active role and call for a military intervention. In January 2012, Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, accused the Syrian regime of acting in bad faith in not implementing the Arab League's proposal. Furthermore, the Kingdom, alongside Qatar, called for international action in Syria, with Prince Saud al-Faisal issuing a statement: 'We are calling on the international community to bear its responsibility, and that includes our brothers in Islamic states and our friends in Russia, China, Europe, and the United States'.⁶³

When the al-Assad regime reportedly used chemical weapons in August 2013, the Arab Gulf countries — led by Saudi Arabia — tried to persuade Washington that al-Assad has crossed the line set by President Obama and that military intervention deposing him was the most appropriate response. Furthermore, Saudi intelligence presented the US with proof in February 2013 that the Syrian regime has deployed chemical weapons.⁶⁴ Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal claimed that: 'Any opposition to any international action would only encourage Damascus to move forward with committing its

crimes and using all weapons of mass destruction'.⁶⁵ But this call for Western intervention created a divide among Arab states. Whereas Saudi Arabia and Qatar among other GCC countries perceived such intervention as necessary, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon were not convinced. In addition, Egypt under President Mohamed Morsi announced its reluctance to support military intervention in Syria. In the meantime, the United States under Obama remained reluctant to adopt direct military action aimed at toppling al-Assad.⁶⁶

With the failure of using diplomatic means to exert substantial pressure over the al-Assad regime, the Saudi Kingdom resorted to other instruments, privileging military and political pressure. Yet, diplomatic means returned to the forefront, intermittently at least, during later stages of the conflict. In 2014, the US swayed the Saudis to join the diplomatic track and engage with the UN-sponsored Geneva II peace process.⁶⁷ In 2017, a new round of Russian and Turkish-backed negotiations was launched in Astana, Kazakhstan. This round was mainly driven by Russia, Turkey, and Iran with limited influence from the US, reflecting the shift in the balance of power in the war.⁶⁸ In this context, the Saudi Kingdom did not participated in the conference while Saudi media outlets characterised the gathering as an 'attempt by regional actors to pursue their own interests'.⁶⁹

Alongside diplomatic means, the Kingdom has employed its traditional policies of using financial resources to influence the outcome of Syria crisis. Indeed, the fortification of *Riyalpolitik* has risen to new heights in the Syrian conflict. In January 2012, due to the failure of the sanctions to exert significant pressure on al-Assad, the Saudis started giving financial support to the Syrian National Council (SNC). As the crisis in Syria descended into an armed conflict, the Saudis departed from Western policies and have, since February 2012, forcefully supported the rebels.⁷⁰ In the process, the Saudi rulers relied on personal ties and tribal connections to distribute arms and funds; in the background, the Kingdom relied on the personal contacts of Intelligence Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan.⁷¹ When the US secretly began arming Syrian rebels in 2013, it relied on Saudi Arabia as its primary partner and the largest contributor, among other regional actors, in its operations in Syria. Whereas the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) took the lead in training the rebels, the Saudi intelligence agency provided money and weapons, including anti-tank missiles.⁷²

These Saudi policies in Syria has created other challenges to the Kingdom at the regional level. A rift with other Gulf states, Qatar in particular, emerged over the Syria crisis. Riyadh and Doha chose to support competing factions within the SNC, and after 2012, the National Coalition for Syria Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC). Whereas Saudi Arabia has relied on tribal ties, Qatar has used its pre-existing links with the Muslim Brotherhood to play an influential role in Syria. Moaz al-Khatib, first president of the SOC, resigned after five months due to external interference. Since his resignation, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar began to push their affiliated clients in prominent positions. Qatar promoted its Brotherhood candidate, Ghassan Hitto, causing nine members of SOC to resign.

From July 2013 to July 2014, Riyadh managed to sustain its own client, Ahmed Jarba, as president of the SOC, considered to be Riyadh's client.

These divisions have been more visible and pronounced over the support of armed groups. Initially, the Saudis supported the FSA until 2013, even going so far as to pay salaries.⁷³ With the perceived weakness of the FSA in making any progress against al-Assad, the Saudis shifted their support to *Jaysh al-Islam* (the Army of Islam or JAI), a group of Salafists that operates independently from the FSA.⁷⁴ In November 2013, JAI along with other Islamist militias formed the Islamic Front, both dissociating themselves from FSA and opposing ISIS. In the meantime, Qatar initially backed groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Liwa al-Tawhid, part of the FSA. Later on, Qatar moved to support some of the radicalised groups such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JAN).

In addition to directly assisting and arming anti-Assad forces, Saudi financial support to these groups flows through private money that citizens are sending to Salafi charities and popular committees in Syria. One of the primary recipients of a donation from the Gulf is the Popular Commission to Support the Syrian people. The organisation has funnelled millions of dollars in funds and humanitarian aid to Salafi militias like Ahrar al-Sham; the money has been used to buy weapons and to buy local support. The degree of complicity of the Saudi government is open to debate. Although the Saudi government has implemented anti-terror financing laws to prevent any funds from reaching the al-Assad regime, no official action has been taken to stop charity funds from reaching the radical militias in the opposition.

The final tool deployed by the Saudi government has been the 'ideational' support provided to the opposition. Saudi elites own Arab satellite television channels, such as *Al-Arabiya*, along with key newspapers, such as *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*. Through these outlets, the Kingdom has promoted a particular narrative about the Syria crisis to their audience in the Sunni world, adopting an anti-Assad and anti-Iranian narrative. Saudi clerics have often promoted a sectarian narrative about the conflict, describing al-Assad as anti-Alawite and anti-Shiite, and some of them have even called for Jihad.⁷⁵ These narratives have helped to amplify the self-proclaimed Saudi position as the guardian of Sunnis in the region.

Changes in Saudi leadership in 2015 brought a new generation to power, which led to significant changes in the Kingdom's foreign policy. Nevertheless, there were no major changes to Saudi policies in Syria. Saudi support for rebels has continued since then, and diplomatic efforts to overthrow Bashar al-Assad have persisted. Syria has, however, dropped in Saudi regional priorities with the launch of the Saudi led-coalition in Yemen in March 2015. Winning the war in Yemen has become the major priority of the Crown Prince Muhammed Bin Salman.⁷⁶

It would be easy to assess Saudi policies in Syria as a failure to achieve its goals. Diplomatic and economic pressure exercised on Bashar al-Assad did not lead to his demise. The military and financial support given to the armed opposition groups has not produced remarkable military progress and has failed to persuade the US to intervene in Syria. Instead, the conflict in Syria has persisted, and al-Assad regime remains resilient. Like other international actors, Saudi Arabia miscalculated the resilience of the Syrian regime, which has successfully turned to Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah for survival. Saudi Arabia is by no means unique in its negative impact on the conflict. The other Gulf states, Russia, Iran, the European Union, and the United States have contributed to the exacerbation of the Syrian situation. It is, however, safe to say that the Saudi involvement has been particularly negative in a number of ways.

First, the Saudi policies in Syria have been impulsive and lacking in any grand strategy. This lack of strategic planning is evident in the hastily backing of armed groups without established intelligence, while tribal and private contacts have been the root of the relationship with the opposition groups. Consequently, the Saudi offered supplies of weapons and funding to groups (mostly FSA elements) which had little power on the ground and with no popular support.⁷⁷ When these groups proved inefficient in achieving victory, the Saudis swiftly redirected their support to other more Salafist/jihadist groups. As a result, the Saudis in their support of rebel groups have failed to create successful patron-client relationships. They have only succeeded in creating unreliable and suspicious partnerships with non-state actors who are likely to be highly selective and opportunistic in their manoeuvres against al-Assad's regime, lacking any ideological fervour or coherence. In short, the Saudis embarked on involvement in a conflict without having an adequate understanding of the political and religious diversity of the Syrian people and even without a strategy to manage it. This lack of strategy had a significant impact on the fragmentation of the opposition and its inability to forge a viable military action against al-Assad.

Second, in their struggle for recognition of the Kingdom's supposed power-house status, the Saudis have preached sectarian discourses at domestic and regional levels. During the Syria crisis, this sectarian discourse has acquired a security dimension. The Kingdom portrayed the al-Assad regime as an existential threat that fostered Shiite encroachment in the region. Although this sectarianism has been promoted for instrumental political ends, it has been internalised and accepted at domestic and regional levels. Before 2011 and despite Saudi unsuccessful efforts in peeling Syria away from Iran, the Syrian regime was never identified as an enemy or a threat in Saudi narratives, but as a mere Arab rival, with which the Kingdom still shared interests in Lebanon and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.⁷⁸ This discourse, however, underwent a significant change since the outbreak of the Syrian uprisings. In the Saudi narrative, the Syrian regime shifted from a mere rival to a Shiite enemy that poses an existential

threat to Sunni Islam in the region. By linking this sectarian discourse to a security dimension, the Saudis risked the sectarianization of the conflict while inflaming sectarian tensions in the Middle East.

Third, using violence and conflict to achieve recognition has far-reaching implications on the Syria crisis and the region. The Saudi involvement in the Syrian conflict led to a significant change in regional geography that will be difficult to reverse. As the scope of Saudi involvement is beyond the Kingdom's capabilities, it is facing limits in both structuring the region or determining the course of developments in the way its leadership desires. This inability to achieve victory may make the Saudis more persistent in their efforts to prove that they are capable of influencing the region, which would only put the region in further disarray.

Alongside the negative impact of Saudi involvement on the Syrian conflict, Saudi Arabia has put its own foreign policy at risk. The Saudis have put themselves into a precarious situation. While the Saudi goal has been to depose al-Assad as a means to win the Kingdom's aspired recognition and respect, this pursuit of recognition may in the end prove self-destructive. The increased sectarian tone at the regional level may lead to domestic tensions between Sunni and Shiite communities in the Gulf as well as in the Kingdom. In addition, with the rise of radical Jihadist groups, such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* and the Islamic State (IS), the Saudis fear a domestic blowback if members of these groups start operating in the Kingdom. Moreover, the conflict in Syria has taken on its own dynamics, making Saudi choices more complex. On the one hand, the Saudis aim to defeat radical groups, such as IS. On the other hand, they fear the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria after defeating it in Egypt. In short, the Saudis aim to ensure the demise of al-Assad in favour of a loyal alternative regime that is neither extremist (IS or *Jabhat al-Nusra*) nor Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, the Saudis are keen to contain the extent of jihadi and sectarian fervour and prevent these from destabilizing the domestic sphere in the Kingdom. As the Saudi Kingdom remains desperate to fulfil its ambition to become the primary actor of Arab regional politics and be recognised as such, it is sowing the seeds of longstanding enmity and conflict in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's policies toward the Syria crisis have evolved since 2011. Initially, Late King Abdullah has attempted to reshape al-Assad's regional policies and pull him back away from Iran and back to the Arab sphere. As a result, the Saudi Kingdom encouraged al-Assad to adopt reforms. With al-Assad unwillingness to follow the Saudi lead, the Kingdom's policy toward Syria became shaped by one objective, that is, to depose al-Assad and shift the country towards the Saudi Arabian orbit. This chapter has provided an explanation for this change in Saudi drivers towards the Syria crisis. It has argued that

this change in behaviour is related to a symbolic driver, that is, the struggle for Saudi recognition of its regional leadership in the region. As the Kingdom saw its military and financial capabilities rising in the last decades, it attempted to acquire a leadership status and get this status recognised by its other Arab states, especially in the context of regional competition with Iran.

As Saudi policies towards al-Assad regime evolved from encouraging to reform to overthrowing the regime, the Kingdom adopted a wide range of instruments, including diplomatic, military, and financial tactics. Since 2011, the Kingdom has maintained an active insurgency towards al-Assad. With the rise of a new leadership to power in 2015, the Kingdom's policies in the Syria crisis have remained unchanged, even if Syria has dropped in the Kingdom's list of priorities as a result of the situation in Yemen.

¹ Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran : Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment"; Mohns and Bank, "Syrian Revolt Fallout: End of the Resistance Axis?"

² Valbjørn and Bank, "The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics."

³ Patrick, "Saudi Arabia's Relations with Syria and Lebanon."

⁴ Quilliam, "Saudi Arabia's Syria Policy," 20.

⁵ ABC News, "Assad Must Go or Face 'Military Option.'"

⁶ Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring"; Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution"; Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

⁷ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 68–69.

⁸ "Saudi Arabia Calls for Syrian Reforms."

⁹ Dehghanpisheh, "Saudi King Condemns Syrian Regime."

¹⁰ Saudis have provided rebel groups with financial support, arms, and training BBC, "Who Is Supplying Weapons to the Warring Sides in Syria?"; Schanzer, "Saudi Arabia Is Arming the Syrian Opposition"; Wezeman, "Arms Transfers to Syria"; Kenner, "Saudi Arabia's Shadow War"; Pierret, "External Support and the Syrian Insurgency."

¹¹ Quilliam, "Saudi Arabia's Syria Policy," 20.

¹² ABC News, "Assad Must Go or Face 'Military Option.'"

¹³ Darwich and Fakhoury, "Casting the Other as an Existential Threat."

¹⁴ e.g. Abdo, "The New Sectarianism"; Obaid, "Iran's Syrian Power Grab and Saudi Arabia."

¹⁵ e.g. Vallely, "The Oldest War on Earth."

¹⁶ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*; Betts, *The Sunni-Shi'a Divide*.

¹⁷ Shakdam, "Saudi Arabia's Escalating Campaign against Shia Muslims."

¹⁸ Al-Labad, "Al-Khitab Al-Su'udi Ma' Nihayat 2014 [The Saudi Discourse at the End of 2014]."

¹⁹ Jones, "Saudi Arabia's Sectarian Ambivalence"; Wehrey and Rand Corporation, *Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam*, 27; Gause, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question."

²⁰ Jones, "Saudi Arabia's Not So New Anti-Shi'ism."

²¹ Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood Predicament."

²² Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism," 6–7.

²³ BBC News, "Guide to the Syrian Rebels."

²⁴ Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations of War."

²⁵ Berti and Paris, "Beyond Sectarianism"; Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism"; Berti and Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?"; Ahmed, "Syria Intervention Plan

Fueled by Oil Interests, Not Chemical Weapon Concern"; Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War."

²⁶ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*.

²⁷ quoted in Sullivan, "Abdullah Lashes out at Al Assad Regime."

²⁸ Chubin, "Is Iran a Military Threat?"

²⁹ Parsi and Cullis, "The Myth of the Iranian Military Giant."

³⁰ Hanna and Kaye, "The Limits of Iranian Power," 177–79.

³¹ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*; Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions*; Guzzini and Leander, *Constructivism and International Relations*.

³² Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*.

³³ Mead, *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*.

³⁴ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*.

³⁵ Braud, *La Violence Politique*.

³⁶ Williams, "Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism and the Moral Construction of Power."

³⁷ Lindemann, *Causes of War*, 34–35; Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 86–87.

³⁸ Markey, "Prestige and the Origins of War."

³⁹ Lindemann, *Causes of War*, 10–12.

⁴⁰ Lindemann, 35.

⁴¹ Ringmar, "The International Politics of Recognition," 8–9.

⁴² Wolf, "Respect and Disrespect in International Politics"; Miller, "Disrespect and the Experience of Injustice"; Ringmar, "The Recognition Game Soviet Russia Against the West"; Fikenscher, Jaschob, and Wolf, "Seeking Status Recognition through Military Symbols: German and Indian Armament Policies between Strategic Rationalizations and Prestige Motives."

⁴³ Richter, "Saudi Arabia: A Conservative P(I)Ayer on the Retreat?," 182.

⁴⁴ Perlo-Freeman et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2014," 2.

⁴⁵ Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism," 12–15.

⁴⁶ Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy: Loss without Gain?"

⁴⁷ Echangué, "Saudi Arabia: Emboldened Yet Vulnerable."

⁴⁸ Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution."

⁴⁹ Ryan, "Jordan, Morocco and an Expanded GCC."

⁵⁰ Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Moving Ahead with Gulf Union - Al-Monitor."

⁵¹ Asayed, "Bridging the Gulf: Where Kuwait Stands on the GCC Union."

⁵² Al-Buluwi, "UAE and Qatar Compete as Saudi Arabia Looks on - Al-Monitor."

⁵³ Gause, "Why Isn't There an Anti-Iran Alliance?"

⁵⁴ Gresh, "Saudi Arabia Feels Insecure."

⁵⁵ Al Omran and Fitch, "Young Saudi Royals Rise as Kingdom Tries to Assert Regional Leadership."

⁵⁶ Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia Pleased With Morsi's Fall."

⁵⁷ Al-Monitor, "Jordan Pressured to Restrict Muslim Brotherhood - Al-Monitor"; Dickinson, "Saudi Action Puts Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait on Spot - Al-Monitor."

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⁶² Phillips, "Gulf Actors and the Syria Crisis," 46.

⁶³ Chulov, "Saudi Arabia to Withdraw Arab League Monitors from Syria."

⁶⁴ Entous, Malas, and Coker, "A Veteran Saudi Power Player Works to Build Support to Topple Assad."

⁶⁵ Reuters, "Arab League Calls for International Community to Act against Syrian Government."

⁶⁶ For a review of the debates surrounding the US intervention in Syria, see Walt "The Great Myth About U.S. Intervention in Syria."

⁶⁷ Phillips, "Gulf Actors and the Syria Crisis," 46.

⁶⁸ Bonsey, "What's at Stake in the Syrian Peace Talks in Astana?"

⁶⁹ BBC, "War of Words as Syria Peace Talks Open."

⁷⁰ Schanzer, "Saudi Arabia Is Arming the Syrian Opposition."

⁷¹ Phillips, "Gulf Actors and the Syria Crisis," 47.

⁷² Mazzetti and Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels."

⁷³ Reuters, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar Funding Syrian Rebels."

⁷⁴ Black, "Syria Crisis."

⁷⁵ McDowall, "Saudi Opposition Clerics Make Sectarian Call to Jihad in Syria."

⁷⁶ Quilliam, "Saudi Arabia's Syria Policy," 22.

⁷⁷ Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War," 8; Phillips, "Gulf Actors and the Syria Crisis," 51.

⁷⁸ Al-Sharq al-Awsat, "Saudi King Seeks to Mend Rift with Syria."

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